

Civic Engagement in the Government Classroom

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Show students how to make their voices heard

- **Write letters to the editor of your local newspaper**
 - Replace several of your essay or position-paper assignments with letter assignments. It's a more authentic assessment, and kids love to see their words in print. Parents love it even more.
 - When a student's letter is published, project it for the class to see. Email faculty and parents with a link to the letter.
 - Consider giving extra credit for every letter published.
- **Contact elected officials at all levels of government**
 - Again, it's more authentic than an essay, and the kids love receiving mail from their representatives.
 - Contact pages on each official's website make such communication easy for everyone, and the kids can print out their comments to turn in to you.
 - Local officials, such as School Board members and Supervisors, are especially responsive, and a few contacts will seem like a groundswell of public opinion.

Attract candidates to your school for a forum

- **Invite both candidates.**
- **Make your event candidate-friendly**
 - Don't expect them to come on the same day; they'll never agree to a debate.
 - Send them the questions ahead of time.
 - Accept surrogates if you can't get the actual candidate.
- **Partner with your local newspaper, especially the editorial department**
 - They are looking for free content and are eager to prove their relevance to the community.
 - The editors and reporters have lots of great political contacts and will often be willing to make calls and provide technical support.
 - They can provide news coverage for the event and publish student reactions afterward.
- **Blend the campaign into your curriculum**
 - Have all students read common articles.
 - Students can write responses to what they've heard.
- **Get the entire senior class involved**
 - Solicit questions from everyone as a graded assignment.
 - Treat question selection as an honor (announce the "winners" over the loudspeaker!).
Seat the questioners on the stage with the candidate.
- **Register the 18 year-olds to vote and seat them in the front rows**
- **Make sure your faculty buys into your idea;** they need to be willing to let your students out of their classes.
- **Invite the media** (your division's public affairs person will want to handle this part).



Watch the forums

• See video of the Cosby Election forums at inRich.com, keyword: Cosby forums.

Former Republican Gov. George Allen, left, represented John McCain at Cosby High School on Sept. 17. A week later on the same stage, former Democratic National Committee Chairman Terry McAuliffe made the case for Barack Obama.

Cosby Students Explore Presidential Campaigns



BOB BROWN/TIMES-DISPATCH



LINDY KEAST RODMAN/TIMES-DISPATCH

■ (Editor's note: Chesterfield County Public Schools, the University of Virginia Center for Politics, and THE TIMES-DISPATCH worked together to present two presidential forums last month at Cosby High School in Chesterfield County. The goal was to educate students about the two presidential tickets — and excite them about the privileges and responsibilities of becoming lifelong voters. The early returns are in.)

At Cosby High School, the month of September saw the entire senior class engaged in intensive study of the presidential campaign in preparation for high-level visitors representing the candidates. Former Virginia Gov. and U.S. Sen. George Allen served as a surrogate from the McCain/Palin campaign, and former DNC Chairman Terry McAuliffe stood in for the Obama/Biden ticket. Both speakers "taught" government class that day, answering pre-selected student questions before an audience of more than 400 students from Cosby and other Chesterfield high schools. Allen and McAuliffe were engaging and informative, the students were attentive and focused, and a lot of learning about issues and platforms took place.

In an attempt to get some of the students to engage with the issues in a more informal setting, the Advanced Placement Government students stayed after school following both sessions for debriefing sessions led by staff from UVa's Center for Politics. For an hour, these students debated the issues shaping this campaign, with a special focus on the perspective of the young voter. They grappled with topics from immigration, the Iraq war, and tax policy to health care, and then went home with the assignment to write a short response about what they learned from the forum process. The pieces you see here are a sampling of their viewpoints.

— Renee Serrao, government teacher, Cosby High School.

What I learned in the McCain forum will lead me to support John McCain for president due to his views on the issues of the war in Iraq and his solutions for energy sources. On the war in Iraq, Sen. George Allen stated that John McCain is for

staying in the war and ensuring a definite victory. He answered a question directed toward the definition of victory in Iraq by saying that our victory will be when the people of Iraq have a stable government and military force that can ensure the freedom and protection of the people in Iraq. Allen suggested that a withdrawal from the war would leave all the soldiers who died for freedom in vain, and all the progress we made would be lost.

On the issue of finding alternative energy sources due to the crisis we are in now, he said that McCain is for drilling offshore on the continental shelf while new alternative biofuel sources are being researched. This will provide some relief from high gas prices while alternative methods are being found. I am pleased with the answers I heard from Allen and I'm very confident on voting for McCain.

— Alex Paulini

The John McCain forum reaffirmed my desire to vote for Barack Obama on Nov. 4. Sen. Allen's response to nearly every question went some-

thing like, "John McCain will cut your taxes and save you the money you need to (1) pay for college; (2) pay for gas; (3) fight credit-card debt; and (4) keep businesses in America." However, after studying the McCain platform, I concluded these highly touted tax cuts will only amount to around \$700 for the average middle-class family (not much considering the government already mails out \$600 checks whenever the economy looks sluggish).

I asked Mr. Allen what John McCain would do to help students afford college. He danced around my question and began his answer by telling me that under no circumstances would I want the federal government to "micromanage" college finances (but I can personally tell you, I sure wouldn't mind some aid). He then proceeded to espouse the "cut taxes" mantra, stressing that lower income taxes would allow parents to save more for college, and reduced corporate-gains taxes on college endowments would enable schools to have more money on hand for financial aid. The problem is, the average family is not going to make \$80,000 — the cost of an in-state education — in tax cuts (even if that \$700 is earned for 18 straight years), and college endow-

ments, as nonprofit institutions, are *already* tax-exempt. The Republican Party needs some new ideas.

The Republican and Democratic forums these past two weeks did not influence my vote as much as they gave me hope for the future of American politics. Too often in America political discussion becomes centered on derisive personal attacks on the candidates or those people who would support a different candidate than oneself. The issues are often neglected, and people become so steadfast in the views that have been instilled in them since childhood that they prove wholly unresponsive to new perspectives and ideas, or at least the idea that liberals and conservatives do actually share some common ground.

However, the recent forums surprised me, not in what the surrogates said, but in how people were able to sit down afterwards in a classroom and have a civilized discussion about political issues.

It is the common threads that come out of these discussions that give me hope that Americans can overcome partisan strife and learn to tolerate each other's beliefs — for the United States government was not meant to be defined by two factions scornfully attacking one another's character or motives; it was meant to be defined instead by serious discussion and deliberation about issues, a caucus in which discordant viewpoints, no matter how strong they might be, are used not to divide people, but to bring people together in a common discussion and a common cause — the creation of a stronger America. It is only through this cultured discussion that America will ever be able to progress functionally towards the future.

— David Casalaspri



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Cosby government students were selected to ask questions and watch the one-hour forums on stage with each politician.